

APPENDIX to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee Minutes of 12 February 2024

Wiltshire Council

Full Council

20 February 2024

Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on the Wiltshire Council Budget 2024/25 - Amendments

Purpose of report

1. To provide to Full Council a summary of the main issues discussed at the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee held on 12 February 2024.

Background

2. The meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 12 February 2024 provided an opportunity to scrutinise amendments to the budget. The meeting on 25 January 2024 had considered the initial proposals from the Cabinet, which were subsequently agreed at Cabinet on 6 February 2024 for recommendation to Full Council on 20 February 2024.
3. Three proposed amendments were received for the meeting from Councillors Gavin Grant and Ian Thorn on behalf of the Liberal Democrat Group.
4. All proposals were provided to the Committee with comments by the Section 151 Officer, Head of Paid Service, and the Monitoring Officer. They were confirmed as financially and legally viable, with comments included on any increased risks such as in relation to use of reserves or use of assumptions to fund additional expenditures.

Wiltshire Council Financial Plan 2024-25: Addendum

5. It was noted that though the meeting was principally for the scrutiny of budget amendments put forward by opposition members; a report had been included which was an update on the administration's Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy. This was agreed by Cabinet on 6 February. The Final Local Government Finance Settlement was announced on 5 February, and it included additional funding for Wiltshire over and above that included in the provisional settlement.
6. It was outlined by the Leader of the Council that the funding was proposed to be used as follows:
 - £0.100m contribution to Air Quality monitoring in 2024/25.
 - £0.025m contribution towards volunteer recruitment by Libraries for residents in remote areas.
 - £0.603m funding for rural play areas to enable them to continue to be used by the local community that will lead to their transfer to the local town or parish council.
 - £3.798m funding for additional investment in SEND and children's services early help and prevention support

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7. It was outlined that the addendum had the effect of amending recommendation A of the proposals included in the Budget 2024/25 report. As the funding had only been confirmed for one year the budget impact and changes would affect 2024/25 only.

Main issues raised during questioning

8. Clarity was sought regarding how the rural play areas funding would be split up, with some communities investing more in their play areas than others. It was outlined that this process would be evidence driven with a desire for the play areas to be improved in an efficient way.
9. It was noted that the Air Quality monitoring would be county wide and that community conversations had been focused in two areas, Studley Green and Bemerton Heath, however additional members of staff had been hired so community conversations would be rolled out wider with an evidence base starting to be gathered.
10. It was questioned whether there was a timeline for the proportion and use of the £3.798m funding for additional investment in SEND and children's services early help and prevention support. It was stated that there was a first draft with a plan to use the funding over a two-year period.
11. Concern was raised that some parishes with small precepts might not be able to afford improving their play areas and whether this issue could be mitigated, to which the importance of ensuring that empowerment stays with Parish Councils was stated.
12. Clarity was provided that the 33 play areas referenced did not include those which had 7-year leases to the towns.

Proposed Amendments

Amendment A

13. The proposal from Councillors Grant and Thorn was as follows:

A £0.003m increase in social welfare funding to each of the 18 Area Boards, and the establishment of a central fund of £0.036m that Area Boards can bid for extra social welfare funding.

14. This would have the following financial impact on the 2024/25 base budget:

Proposal	Impact £m
£0.003m increase in social welfare funding to each of the 18 Area Boards	0.054
Establishment of a central fund of £0.036m that Area Boards can bid for extra social welfare funding	0.036
Total annual pressure of proposals	0.090
Total pressure across MTFs	0.270

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Funding Proposal of Pressure	
Reduce the Business Plan Priority reserve allocation of £0.821m for Council wide enforcement activity by the total of £0.270m	0.270

Amendment B

15. This proposal from Councillors Grant and Thorn was as follows:

To remove the income budget introduced in 2022/23 as a result of the saving included in the budget to introduce parking charges for Blue Badge holders of £0.040m.

16. This would have the following financial impact on the 2024/25 base budget:

Proposal	Impact £m
Remove the income budget introduced in 2022/23 as a result of the saving included in the budget to introduce parking charges for Blue Badge holders	0.040
Total annual pressure of proposal	0.040
Total pressure across MTFS	0.120
Funding Proposal of Pressure	
Reduce the Business Plan Priority reserve allocation of £0.821m for Council wide enforcement activity by the total of £0.120m	0.120

Amendment C

17. This proposal from Councillors Grant and Thorn was as follows:

Provision of funding of £0.075m to enable partnership working with VisitWiltshire or an equivalent body in both 2024/25 and 2025/26.

18. This would have the following financial impact on the 2024/25 base budget:

Proposal	Impact £m
Provision of funding of £0.075m to enable partnership working with VisitWiltshire or an equivalent body	0.075
Total pressure of proposal in 2024/25	0.075
Total pressure across 2024/25 and 2025/26	0.150
Funding Proposal of Pressure	
Reduce the Wiltshire Towns Funding by £0.150m to allow for a budget surplus to fund this pressure	0.150

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19. For each amendment the Chairman gave the opportunity for Members of the Cabinet who were present to respond if they wished, as well as opportunity for the Corporate Leadership Team to add anything further to the statutory officer comments provided with the submissions. The Section 151 Officer, Lizzie Watkin, provided clarification on the amendments where appropriate.

Main issues raised during questioning and debate

Amendment A

20. Councillor Grant introduced his amendment and explained its purpose and implications. He stated that each of the 18 Area Boards would receive £3,000 and that there would be a central pot of funding available with Area Boards able to bid for additional funding.

21. Details were provided that the impact of the funding of the proposal would have the effect of reducing the Business Priority Plan Fund commitment of £0.821m to Council wide enforcement activity by £0.090m in 2024/25, and by a total of £0.270m over the MTFS period.

22. Queries were raised on whether the additional funding to Area Boards would be a straight split of £3,000 each as generally Area Board funding had a formula applied to it to represent the size and need of the area. It was clarified that this was not the case, and the additional pot would represent an opportunity for Area Boards to receive more funding.

23. It was questioned where the money would be taken from to fund Amendments A and B, to which clarity was provided from the Section 151 Officer, that the Business Plan Priority reserve allocation for Council wide enforcement activity was a reserve set aside for additional enforcement activity. Further clarity was provided that this reserve referred to enforcement activity as a whole to provide a coherent approach to tackling enforcement as a joined-up authority, with planning, licensing and other departments linked. The reserve would fund a One Council approach to dealing with enforcement issues particularly where there were concerns about safety to life.

24. Emphasis was placed on the need for evidence when conducting enforcement activity and that such work would be reliant on the need to develop an evidence base through officers.

25. The need for Members to discuss the risks and priorities of not having the reserve for enforcement activity or not having the additional Area Board funding was stressed.

Amendment B

26. Councillor Grant presented the amendment, whose purpose was to remove the income budget introduced in 2022/23 as a result of the saving included in the budget to introduce parking charges for Blue Badge holders of £0.040m.

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27. Clarity was provided by the Monitoring Officer that though this had been a decision regarding the previous budget, the financial implications would remain on this budget, therefore meaning that the amendment was relevant.
28. Clarity was provided that if accepted, this amendment would allow Blue Badge holders to have free parking in Wiltshire Council car parks.
29. A point was raised that if someone can afford to run a car, then it would be likely that they would be able to afford to pay for parking.
30. It was questioned that if this amendment was accepted, what would the implications be for the capital funded programme to move parking machines, to which it was clarified that this programme was separate and aimed to achieve several objectives including improved accessibility of car parks and the introduction of cashless payments.
31. The Section 1515 Officer provided clarity that as it is not possible to calculate the actual income generated through disabled or able-bodied residents paying for parking. Therefore, the estimate of £40,000 was included as the figure included as a saving included as part of a previous budget setting process.
32. A point was raised that some residents with disabilities would be happy to pay for their parking.
33. A suggestion was made that it would be preferred that the savings from this amendment, if accepted, be used for enhancing the capital fund programme and ensuring that more accessible meters were put into communities faster.

Amendment C

34. Cllr Gavin Grant presented the amendment, detailing the provision of funding of £0.075m to enable partnership working with VisitWiltshire or an equivalent body in both 2024/25 and 2025/26. It was also noted that a competitive process for tender would have to take place should the amendment be passed.
35. It was outlined that the £150,000 funding for the amendment would be from the Wiltshire Towns Funding.
36. The Leader suggested that the £500,000 of unallocated funding referenced as being within the Wiltshire Towns Funding did not relate to the latest figures and that everything within the Wiltshire Towns Funding had been allocated in one way or another.
37. It was agreed that officers would obtain the precise details of the Wiltshire Towns Funding and that this would be shared with Members as soon as possible.
38. The Monitoring Officer provided clarity that regarding the amendment and withdrawal of funding from the Wiltshire Towns Funding, that as there was no legal commitments and binding, this may lead to disappointed partners at the end of the process should

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the amendment be accepted. Clarity was provided that conversations with partners take place off the record initially, before then being made public and contractual.

39. Queries were raised as to the benefit of approving the amendment and what return might be expected to communities and the county following the investment. A question was also posed that if the Council was not to spend money on building such partnerships with bodies, then what would be done to promote the tourism and economic health of the county.
40. Reference was made to the deadlines within the scrutiny process.
41. A point was made which suggested that statistically Wiltshire was the worst performing county in the Southwest in terms of value for money from Visit Wiltshire's efforts.
42. Assurance was provided that bodies other to VisitWiltshire did exist and would seek such a tender if it was available.
43. It was suggested that it would be beneficial for the amendment to outline the potential benefits of going out to tender to an outside body for such a provision.

Conclusion

44. Cllrs Thorn and Grant were thanked for submitting their budget proposals to the Committee, and it was noted that they have been scrutinised.
45. To ask Full Council to take note of the comments of the Committee, as presented in this report.

Councillor Graham Wright

Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

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